

# *INFANTRY* Interview

## Thoughts on U.S.-Ukrainian Training

**COLONEL GENERAL VASYL T. SOBKOV, UKRAINIAN ARMY**

*Colonel General Vasyl T. Sobkov, Deputy Minister of Defense, Commander of Ground Forces, Ukraine recently visited Fort Benning as his country's senior representative to the 1996 United States-Ukrainian Staff Talks, and agreed to an interview with INFANTRY Magazine to discuss issues relevant to the Army of Ukraine and of interest to readers of INFANTRY.*

*Colonel General Sobkov graduated from the Military Academy in Kazan, Ukraine, in 1966 and has commanded at platoon, company, battalion, regiment, division, corps, and army levels; has served as Commander, Trans-Carpathian Military District; and has been the Deputy Minister of Defense, Commander of Ground Forces of Ukraine, since 1994. He is a graduate of the Military Academy, Moscow; the Military General Staff Academy, Moscow; and the Senior Level Course of the Military General Staff Academy, Moscow. Colonel General Sobkov's staff assignments include division chief of staff and Chief of Main Staff, Ukrainian Armed Forces.*



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### **What do you consider the greatest challenge facing the Army of Ukraine today?**

The greatest challenge—and the most important duty—of the Army of Ukraine is to provide national security and protect the sovereignty of the State. This mission also includes the security and protection of our borders.

### **What type of professional development programs and schools are available for officers and noncommissioned officers of the Army of Ukraine?**

The Ukrainian Army has good, well-developed programs for the training of its officers. Army officers are trained in several ways, at the Odessa Army Institute, at the Kiev Ground Forces Academy, at the service branch schools for Artillery and Armor, and at the Kharkov Military University. The term of study for commanders is four years, while the engineering faculty program lasts five years. Upon graduation, officers are commissioned as lieutenants with a military education and receive as well a civilian degree in engineering. Noncommissioned officers receive specialized training

that lasts six months at military training centers. There are seven such centers in the Army of Ukraine. During their military career, officers receive additional training according to their military specialty, in specialized training centers and military faculties in civilian academic institutions.

**How much emphasis does your Army place on physical fitness and conditioning? Are physical fitness standards based upon a common required level of fitness, or are commanders allowed to set their own standards?**

We pay a great deal of attention to physical conditioning and training. Our officers, noncommissioned officers, and soldiers receive from five to six hours of physical conditioning per week, and many continue to conduct additional individual training on their own. The Army has specific, high PT standards, and units throughout the Army participate in competitions based upon physical proficiency. Half of the Olympic medals won by Ukraine in the Atlanta Olympics were won by Army competitors. Our athletes are regular participants in the international Sigma competitions, and during the latest one—held in Italy—placed in the top ten among 70 nations participating. The Ukrainian Army has Army-wide physical fitness standards, based upon age and branch of service, but commanders are authorized to set their own standards initially, until their units reach the desired level of proficiency.

**What branches of the Army does Ukraine train, and what do you see as the role of infantry forces?**

The Ukrainian Army trains mechanized, armor, missile, artillery, air defense, artillery, airmobile, and armed aviation forces. We see the mechanized infantry as having the primary role in our Army, although we train both light and airmobile infantry as well. You must remember that our military doctrine is defensive in nature, since our mission is to defend the State and its borders. We also feel that these infantry forces will be well suited to our new mission of peacekeeping in conjunction with the forces of other nations.

**What is the reaction of members of your Army to conducting training and operations with the United States Army?**

We are now in the third year of the Partnership for Peace, where we met and worked with U.S. forces for the first time. Our soldiers were naturally curious and interested in working with Americans. In 1996 Ukraine hosted the Peace Shield multinational exercise, and in spite of the fact that more than nine nations participated, all of the soldiers worked well together, and there were no misunderstandings of significance as they spoke a specific "soldiers' language," which is common for all armies.

**How long must today's soldier of the Army of Ukraine serve on active duty? Is it possible to maintain the necessary level of combat readiness with an active duty tour of this length?**

Today's term of service in the Army of Ukraine is 18 months. Up to the present time, it is still national law that all men must perform military service and take part in the defense of the nation. It is certainly possible to sustain a combat ready force with an 18-month tour of service, so long as the soldiers train hard, take their work seriously, and perform their duties well. As we develop higher skill proficiency and receive additional funding, we will be able to continue to reach and maintain the level of combat readiness we want. Our experience as part of a multinational force in the former Yugoslavia has shown that Ukrainian soldiers compare very favorably with those of other nations. The way in which a soldier can perform his duties depends in large part on his attitude toward those duties and the military service.



**Do you feel that training in logistical and support operations is receiving enough emphasis in the Army of Ukraine?**

The subject of logistical operations receives a great deal of attention in our Army. We have a number of military academic institutions that train our officers and non-commissioned officers in logistical areas. Our junior noncommissioned officers receive their training in their own service schools. Logistics systems are included as part of all combined arms exercises. We have gained a great deal of experience, from World War II through Afghanistan, and logistics is an area of major attention in our Army.



**To what extent do environmental concerns affect the use of training facilities and field maneuver areas for the Army of Ukraine?**

Environmental concerns have become significantly more important than they were in the past. When we were part of the USSR, less attention was paid to environmental issues, but now much more attention is being paid during operations of not only our Army but our Navy and Air Force as well. Within our armed forces there are now special control teams whose mission is to focus on environmental issues.

**Approximately how much time do units of the Army of Ukraine spend training either in the field or in garrison?**

By regulation, units of the Army of Ukraine must spend no less than 50 percent of their time in the field. In spite of the 18-month tour of service, combat training in the field is heavily stressed. Our training during exercise *Peace Shield 96*, for example, was so intensive that some commanders were questioned if they were in danger of violating the human rights of the soldiers. But our soldiers worked hard, because they understood that their mission was an important one.

**Based upon your Army's missions and your own experience, what type of armament do you think an infantry fighting vehicle should have? Should antitank missiles be part of it?**

The experience in Afghanistan has shown that the BMP-2, with its 30mm cannon, 7.62mm machinegun, and antitank missile is an effective infantry fighting vehicle. This is the ideal armament, given the defensive mission of the Ukrainian Army. The missile is reliably effective against tanks out to 4,000 meters, and the 30mm cannon is ideal against APCs and other vehicles, as well as against low-flying helicopters. The infantry squads in the BMPs have grenade launchers that can effectively engage targets as far as 500 to 800 meters out. With these and the small arms of the squad, a BMP can engage targets from point-blank range out to four kilometers. The antitank missile should be part of the infantry fighting vehicle's armament.

**In our dealings with the armies of other nations, soldiers of the United States Army have always learned a great deal from contact with other forces' soldiers. What would you like U.S. soldiers to learn from training with your soldiers?**

During training with our soldiers, I would like U.S. soldiers to have the opportunity to conduct operations on the large ranges and maneuver facilities we have available. They will have the experience of coordinated operations between arms and services, as well as all branches such as air defense and air mobility. We have the facilities to maneuver and train large units and elements, and on terrain that includes mountains, plains, forests, and swamps. Live-fire exercises are also possible. If the United States Army wants to train under difficult conditions and in areas with which they are not familiar, we can offer the opportunity to do it successfully.